

Stray by **flashforeward**

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Summary:

Billy finds a stray in the back yard.

Stray

Author's Note:

So it's kind of turning out that all my shorter Stranger Things fics are set in the same universe as a longer fic I'm working on that isn't anywhere near done yet. That hasn't been a problem til now, but all you really need to know is:

Billy is aware of the Upside Down.

He's taking the trash out when he sees the cat, inching up on the house from the brush out back. Its mangy and half-feral, covered in dirt and mud. Some patches of hair are missing while others stick out at odd angles, covered in what looks disgustingly like dried, off-color spit. Billy sets the bag down on the ground and kneels slowly, holding his hand out, palm down and fingers loose. He waits and watches as the cat inches forward, then the back door bangs open, it lets out a hiss, and disappears back into the night.

"You're supposed to be taking out the trash, not inviting wildlife into our yard," Neil calls from the doorway. Billy doesn't answer, just stands and hoists the bag back up, dragging it to the trash can and dumping it in. By the time he gets back to the house, Neil's returned to his position in the living room, television tuned to some news station.

Billy considers letting it be but it'll piss his dad off so he snags a can of tuna from the cupboard, opens it up and slips quietly back outside. He lays a trail of tuna from the brush to the back stoop and crouches there with the can just in front of him, waiting. He thinks he's going to be there all night - legs cramping and feet falling asleep - when he hears a soft, pitiful mew and the cat reappears. It sniffs at the tuna and starts eating it, following the trail forward to Billy. It freezes at the can and waits, but Billy - despite the ache in his legs - doesn't move and it finishes its meal.

After, it sniffs tentatively at Billy's knee, then butts its head against him, purring. Billy slowly reaches out and lets it sniff his hand, then

scratches gently at its ears. "You need a bath, bud," he says quietly. He carefully scoops the cat up, cradling it gently as he sneaks back into the house. He checks to make sure Neil is still in front of the television, then slowly tiptoes to the bathroom and locks himself in.

He hopes Max doesn't decide she needs to use it while he's in there or the whole operation will be bust.

He runs the bath while the cat explores, sniffing around. It seems nonplussed when he scoops it up and sets it in the water. He washes it slowly, being careful not to pull on its fur as he tries to loosen the knots. It keeps licking at his palm as he clears the strange, hardened saliva from its face and he laughs softly at the tickling sensation.

A knock comes at the door. "Aren't you done?" Max calls. "Don't you just dunk your head and call it a day?" She knocks again. The cat pulls away from him, cowering in the corner of the bath tub, eyes jerking back and forth.

"It's okay," Billy says softly, standing and slowly crossing to the door. He opens it a crack and, before Max can say anything else, he grabs her shirt collar and pulls her in, closing the door behind her and locking it again. He holds a finger to his lips, then points to the cat.

Max stares at the creature, then starts forward slowly, crouching down by the tub. "Mews?" she asks.

The cat meows. Max slowly reaches out and the cat sniffs at her hand, then butts its head against her fingers.

Max turns to look up at Billy. "This is Mews, Dustin's cat," she says. "We thought Dart ate her."

"Oh," Billy says, voice quiet.

Max chuckles. "Were you going to try to keep her?" she asks. Billy shrugs. "What were you gonna do, hide her in your closet?"

She has a point. "Whatever," Billy says, crouching down beside her. "Let's get her cleaned up and call Dustin."

Max is quiet as they finish washing Mews. They haven't really

discussed everything, this other realm full of horrors that she's been to and come back from. That he's glimpsed just barely. It's hung between them for weeks now and tonight's the first time either of them has brought it up. So much happened that night, but it didn't fix anything. Billy isn't sure why he expected it to. Maybe he'd thought that this thing that was so much bigger than their petty human problems would put things into perspective, make it easier for him.

But it hasn't.

Neil is still Neil and Billy's still angry.

"We could keep her for tonight," she says quietly as she holds Mews, wrapped in a town, gently against her chest. "And drive her back to Dustin's in the morning."

Billy smiles and ruffles her hair, then scoops Mews from her arms. "Thanks," he says, "but you're right. We're not prepared for a cat."

Max is quiet for a moment, then she holds up a finger and disappears into the hall. He hears her talking to Neil in a low voice, but has no idea what they're talking about. Then she returns, banging the door open. "Hey," she says, loud enough to be overheard, "Dad says you have to take me to Dustin's so we can finish our project."

Billy hands her the cat, trying not to smile. "I owe you one," he says.

"You owe me a lot."

She isn't wrong.

In the car, Max keeps Mews as calm as she can while she gives Billy directions. Billy's a little worried about seeing Dustin again - he hasn't seen any of the other kids since that night, besides in passing at school. They don't like him, he can't blame them, but they're Max's friends and while he hasn't fixed their relationship completely yet he's trying and being on better terms with her friends would help.

He thinks.

It's going to take a lot, though. After everything he's done.

"We're here," Max says. Billy pulls up to the curb and puts the car in park, idling and waiting for Max to get out and carry Mews up to the door. Instead, she stares at him, then points at the key. "You're coming with me," she says. "You found her."

Sighing, he turns the car off and gets out, joining Max on the walk up to the Henderson's front door. Max hands Mews to Billy and knocks.

Dustin answers. He's happy for a second when he sees Max, then he notices Billy and his face falls. The quiet is awkward and threatens to stretch on but Max elbows Billy in the ribs and he remembers they're here for a reason.

"We, uh, found your cat," he says, holding his arms out.

Mews is still wrapped in the towel and still looks a little worse for the wear, but she wriggles at the sight of Dustin, trying to get to him. Uncertain, he reaches out and takes her, a small smile growing as he realizes it really *is* Mews. "Wow," he whispers. "Where'd you get to, huh?" He presses a small kiss to Mews's head, then lets her go in the house and turns back, meeting Billy's eyes. "Thanks," he says. Billy just shrugs.

There's a shriek from inside. "Dusty! Mews is back! Dusty, come see!" Mrs. Henderson calls.

Billy stifles a laugh, resisting the urge to call Dustin Dusty - partially because he can feel Max's glare and partially because Dustin looks absolutely horrified. *See*, Billy reminds himself, *you can learn*.

"We should get going," Max says. "See you at school."

She turns and walks back towards the car, leaving Billy standing there awkwardly. "Um. Glad your cat's okay," he says, shoving his hands in his pockets. He turns on his heel and starts to follow Max, thinks he might have heard another *Thanks* before the door clicks closed but he can't be sure.

"That wasn't so bad," Max says, feet up on the dashboard - a concession he has had to make since he owes her so very much. "Progress."

Billy just shrugs, puts the car in gear, and turns back towards home. He's surprised at how well he can breathe right now, here, riding quietly in the car with Max. He knows when they get home they'll go their separate ways. The weight of everything they aren't talking about will settle back down on their shoulders and they'll work around each other. But here, now, this quiet drive to return a friend's lost cat...it feels like a glimpse of what could be.

And Billy finds he likes that.